

5

Conspiracy Theories: Exploitation of Cognitive Vulnerabilities by Destructive Institutions

by
Michael J. Fargano

10

Destructive Institutions Supplement No. 2 In Four Parts:

- ***Cognitive Vulnerability to Believing in Conspiracy Theories***
 - ***Exploitation of the Cognitive Vulnerability***
 - ***Destructive Institutions Purpose of the Exploitation***
 - ***Recommendations***
- 15

20

**Issue 2 – Working Paper – Request for Comments
09 Sep 2020**

25

***For Presentation at the 11th Annual Workshop on Unintended Consequences:
Expected Inequalities and Unintended Symmetries***
10-11 May 2021*, Warsaw Poland
University of Warsaw
<http://unintended.uw.edu.pl/>

30

35

Creative Commons Copyright License – CC BY 4.0:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



* The workshop may be a virtual/on-line workshop due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

PREFACE

The USA *Declaration of Independence* reminds us:

5 ...*That to secure these rights* [i.e., “unalienable Rights, that among these are Life,
Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”], *Governments are instituted... That whenever any*
10 *Form of Government* [or institutional governance] *becomes destructive of these ends, it*
15 *is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government* [or
institutional governance]...

10 ...*Governments* [or institutional governance] *long established should not be*
15 *changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath*
shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than
to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed...

Author contact information:

20 Michael J. Fargano

LinkedIn Profile: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/fargano>

Email address: michael.fargano@gmail.com

25 **Web Access to Destructive Institutions Body of Work Library:**

https://archive.org/details/@michael_fargano

Video Presentation:

30 The video presentation of the Destructive Institutions Body of Work at the 10th Annual Unintended
Consequences Workshop can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/ckoDFpcPsdg>

Creative Commons Copyright License – CC BY 4.0:

35 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



ABSTRACT

This paper provides the 2nd supplemental paper for the *destructive institutions** framework. The purpose of this paper is to provide perspective on conspiracy theories (i.e., complex disinformation) in modern society and their usefulness to *destructive institutions*. Specifically, a *destructive institution* – via *destructive institution brainhacking* – generates and exploits conspiracy theories as a detraction from the real destruction caused by the *destructive institution*. In addition and most importantly, a *destructive institution* maintains political support for itself by using conspiracy theories to maintain the political divide and enemies mindset by stoking mistrust, stoking a Them vs Us fear environment and stoking the vision that the opposition is a core or existential threat. This sustains a Conspiracy Theory Vicious Cycle where conspiracy theories lay the ground work to spawn more conspiracy theories (See Figure 1).

Key Recommendation: It is not an easy task to break the conspiracy theories vicious cycle. There is significant motivation by malignant actors to generate conspiracy theories driving the political divide further which makes it easier for more conspiracy theories to be formed. The following three references can be helpful in mitigating and remediating the damage: (1) *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook* is useful on a micro level to help an individual to understand that they are possibly believing in a conspiracy theory (i.e., complex disinformation). (2) *Our Common Purpose – Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* is useful on a macro level in that it has recommendations to reduce the propagation of disinformation in America, e.g., see Strategy 5: Build Civic Information Architecture that Supports Common Purpose. (3) *Securing the United States from Online Disinformation—A Whole-of-Society Approach* focused on dealing with social media platforms. See the Recommendations section for links to the references above.

This paper can be used as support for paper preparation for the 11th Annual Workshop on Unintended Consequences. There is a Call For Papers on Destructive Institutions Predictive Analysis for a Mini-Workshop during the 11th Annual Workshop. See Appendix B for the Call For Papers. The *destructive institutions* Framework is described in the following paper and is prerequisite reading:

Destructive Institutions:

Systems-Based Commonality from Institutional Slavery to Fossil Fuel Institution (Climate Crisis) – The Understood/Unintended Consequences of the Complex of Amoral Power (Invisible Hand)
by

Michael J. Fargano

Issue 2 – Working Paper – Request for Comments
14 April 2020

The first four applications of the *destructive institutions* framework are contained in the paper above. These are: (1) chattel slavery (USA historical focus); (2) climate crisis (USA and worldwide focus); (3) mass shootings crisis (USA focus); (4) opioid crisis (USA focus with potential for worldwide crisis). The first four applications were *destructive institutions for profit* applications of the *destructive institution contract*. Application No. 5 covers the worldwide ingress refugee crisis; it is the first *destructive government* application, specifically a democratic *destructive government* application.

*Convention for this paper: all new definitions are shown in *italic*, e.g., *destructive institutions*. See the *destructive institutions* framework paper for the definitions.

Application No. 6 covers the USA Federal Government Perverse Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis; this is the second democratic *destructive government* application. Application No. 7 covers the USA Perverse Capitalism, related to Application No. 6; this is the third democratic *destructive institutions* body of work.

The structure of this paper is as follows:

- Cognitive Vulnerability to Believing in Conspiracy Theories
- Exploitation of The Cognitive Vulnerability
- Destructive Institutions Purpose of the Exploitation
- Recommendations
- Appendix A: Destructive Institutions Body of Work (References)
- Appendix B: Call For Papers
- Appendix C: Figure 1 Conspiracy Theory Vicious Cycle)

Paper Revision History

Working Paper Issue 1: 27 Aug 2020

Working Paper Issue 2: 09 Sep 2020

INTRODUCTION

A *destructive institution* is a legal institution that uses Corruption (legalized or illegal) and Brainhacking (cognitive plays like disinformation, propaganda and conspiracy theories) as a core part of its sustainability and growth strategy and tactics; such that the security of unalienable Rights such as Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness of people are neglected, degraded or destroyed; where, the institution's core gains including financial gains are correlated with powerful and large scale destruction* and where there is an out-of-control destruction situation with malfunctioning or no control limit to the destruction (i.e., no/poor checks) and malfunctioning or no control of the growth of destruction (i.e., no/poor balance). There are two basic forms of *destructive institutions*: *destructive institutions for profit* (e.g., Fossil Fuels Institution driving the Climate Crisis) and *destructive governments* (e.g., democratic *destructive governments* driving the Refugee Crisis or Totalitarian States). The *destructive institutions* Framework paper reference above in the Abstract or in Appendix A (Body of Work References) has more details and formal definitions.

This paper provides the 2nd supplemental paper for the *destructive institutions* framework. The purpose of this paper is to provide perspective on conspiracy theories in modern society and their usefulness to *destructive institutions*. Specifically, a *destructive institution* – via *destructive institution brainhacking* – generates and exploits conspiracy theories as a detraction from the real destruction caused by the *destructive institution*. In addition and most importantly, a *destructive institution* maintains political support for itself by using conspiracy theories to maintain the political divide and enemies mindset by stoking mistrust, stoking a Them vs Us fear environment and stoking the vision that the opposition is a core or existential threat; this sustains a Conspiracy Theory Vicious Cycle where conspiracy theories lay the ground work to spawn more conspiracy theories.

COGNITIVE VULNERABILITY TO BELIEVING IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Several papers and articles show human evolution and survival as the root cause that makes humans vulnerable to believing in conspiracy theories (i.e., complex disinformation), e.g., on a foundation of mistrust, Them vs Us, etc. Here are some example references:

- *Suspicion makes us human*
<https://aeon.co/amp/essays/how-conspiracy-theories-evolved-from-our-drive-for-survival>
- *Conspiracy theories: Evolved functions and psychological mechanisms*
<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-58342-008>
- *Conspiracy theories: how belief is rooted in evolution – not ignorance*
<https://theconversation.com/conspiracy-theories-how-belief-is-rooted-in-evolution-not-ignorance-128803>

This “vulnerability” or need can be viewed as part of the human experience similar to beliefs in mythology or religion or cult as ways to explain the worldview that is believed in by a society or subset of society. In a sense conspiracy theories are modern mythology explaining the worldview of the believers in the conspiracy theories. This can be leveraged or exploited by *destructive institutions* to

* “Destruction” is characterized as irreparable harms or damages, or harms or damages that are very difficult to remediate.

promote conspiracy theories in the form of malignant modern mythology (malignant complex disinformation) – for the benefit and profit of *destructive institutions*.

5 The following is an applicable quote from Joseph Campbell from the book and TV documentary – *The Power of Myth*:

10 *The main motifs of the myths are the same, and they have always been the same. If you want to find your own mythology, the key is with what society do you associate? Every mythology has grown up in a certain society in a bounded field. Then they come into collision and relationship, and they amalgamate, and you get more complex mythology.*

You can see the above quote in action, e.g., with the morphing of the Pizza-gate conspiracy theory into the QAnon conspiracy theories – as malignant modern mythology.

15 The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) has a list of disinformation techniques that are commonly used. Conspiracy theories are one of these disinformation techniques – with conspiracy theories being a complex form of disinformation. Generally speaking, humans are vulnerable to all forms of disinformation – simple and complex. See the following CEPA link for the list of disinformation techniques: <https://www.cepa.org/disinfo-techniques>.
20

EXPLOITATION OF THE COGNITIVE VULNERABILITY

25 Per the previous section, humans are vulnerable to believing in conspiracy theories. *Destructive institutions* use *destructive institution brainhacking* as the main way to generate and exploit this human vulnerability. The definition of *destructive institution brainhacking* copied from the *destructive institutions* Framework is:

30 *destructive institution brainhacking*: The institutional amoral or corrupt communications/influence play to cognitive biases, defenses, and self-preservation that results in denial and rationalizations of destruction where the cascading result is the willful acceptance of one or more *destructive institutions* with the goal of solidifying supporters such that they have no or low empathy to the destruction and human impacts – and therefore disabling the checks and balances to the destruction.

35 The following is the foundational *destructive institution brainhacking* used as a prerequisite for further *destructive institution brainhacking* to setup the full exploitation of a conspiracy theory as complex disinformation:

- 40
- Trust damage or destruction (mistrust) in authority and governance especially from non-likeminded people and institutions.
 - Them vs Us fear; this follows from the mistrust.
 - Core or existential threats (e.g., way of life or religion or worldview at risk); this follows from Them vs Us fear – including various fear tactics such as driving xenophobia.
- 45

This sets up a Conspiracy Theory Vicious Cycle where conspiracy theories lay the ground work to spawn more conspiracy theories by growing the foundation of mistrust, fear and threats (see **Figure 1**).

The Conspiracy Theory Vicious Cycle is part of a demoralization process – necessary for exploitation to occur. Here is a quote from Yuri Bezmenov (former USSR KGB agent) on demoralization (<https://www.crossroad.to/Quotes/brainwashing/2007/bezmenov.htm>):

5 *As I mentioned before, exposure to true information does not matter anymore. A person who was demoralized is unable to assess true information. The facts tell nothing to him, even if I shower him with information, with authentic proof, with documents and pictures. ...he will refuse to believe it.... That's the tragedy of the situation of demoralization. The next stage is destabilization....*

10 To drive a common type of conspiracy theory on the foundation above, real problems or events that exist with major societal impacts as points-of-fact in a mental map are given false or conspiratorial connections under a grand orchestration scheme by the opposition or enemies of a group (i.e., the Them). Some examples:

- 15 ● Vaccine conspiracy theories
 ● COVID-19 conspiracy theories
 ● Sandy Hook school massacre of children conspiracy theory
 ● 9/11 conspiracy theory
20 ● Flat-earth conspiracy theory
 ● NASA moon mission conspiracy theory

As an example, the conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 are very complex fabrications and still have room to grow. In one example some points and conspiratorial connections are: Dr. Anthony Fauci brought COVID-19 to Wuhan China to be unleashed on the world; 5G Wireless technology is distributing the virus; Bill Gates plans on inserting nefarious electronic chips into people with the COVID-19 vaccine. The points-of-fact are: (1) Dr. Anthony Fauci is a world renowned infectious diseases expert; (2) the virus started in Wuhan China; (3) 5G Wireless technology is a new technology that was and is still ramping up deployment; (4) Bill Gates and the Bill and Malinda Gates Foundation focuses on public health and vaccines. In this COVID-19 conspiracy theory there are points-of-fact; the conspiratorial and fabricated connections are where the disinformation can be found – and this makes for overall complex disinformation. The underlying thinking here, similar to other large impact related conspiracy theories, is that the impacts of COVID-19 have been so great on the USA and world, that there must be some grand orchestration as part of a vast conspiracy – so use your imagination and worst thinking about these people and institutions and believe the conspiratorial connection.

40 An extreme form *destructive institution brainhacking* driving extreme conspiracy theories is demonstrated by the supposed points-of-fact (which are actual false) in the mental map are fabricated along with conspiratorial connections of the points. Some example:

- Pizza-gate conspiracy theory
 ● Mail-in ballot mass fraud conspiracy theory
 ● QAnon conspiracy theories

45 In the three cases above, there is no basis in facts for the conspiratorial connections. Having points-of-non-facts (falsified points of information) that are connected with false connections is getting into the

realm of serious mass delusion – as seen by rational people not believing in the conspiracy theories. However, for believers in the conspiracy theories (that are not psychotic) they view these conspiracy theories as a form of insider code, heroes vs enemies mythology storytelling (as foundation for their worldview) and/or religious augmentation. This article describes how some Evangelical Christians are embracing QAnon:

- *QAnon: The alternative religion that's coming to your church*
<https://religionnews.com/2020/08/17/qanon-the-alternative-religion-thats-coming-to-your-church/>

Real world dangerous consequences manifest with such extreme *destructive institution brainhacking*. For example, the Pizza-gate conspiracy theory claimed falsely that Hillary Clinton and other prominent members of the Democratic Party ran a pedophile ring from the basement of a specific pizza restaurant in Washington DC. In this example, one person became so distressed in his state of (delusional) belief, that he took a long car ride to the pizza restaurant and ran in with an assault rifle demanding access to basement. There was no basement. He was arrested. The Pizza-gate conspiracy theory rolled over and expanded into the QAnon conspiracy theories with the expansion to the deep-state being evil with Donald J Trump being good and a savior fighting against deep-state rings of pedophiles and cannibals. It is apparent that the QAnon conspiracy theories, albeit seen as delusional to rational people, provides a strong foundation of mistrust, fear and threats that binds the QAnon believers together like a form of mythology or cult or religion. From an practical perspective, this is convenient rationalization for citizens to own lots of firearms including military style firearms – which most QAnon followers believe in; the ends justifies the (conspiratorial) means.

As can be seen in the conspiracy theories above, they support growing the foundation supporting all conspiracy theories and disinformation, e.g., growing mistrust, Them vs Us fear, core or existential threats. This forms a vicious cycle that maintains and grows the political divide and enemies mindset and supports more conspiracy theories and disinformation. See **Figure 1**.

DESTRUCTIVE INSTITUTIONS PURPOSE OF THE EXPLOITATION

The purpose of any of the malignant actions by a *destructive institution* is to sustain and grow the *destructive institution*. *Destructive institution brainhacking*, as the primary generator of conspiracy theories, is one of many malignant actions that supports a *destructive institution*. Some examples:

- *Destructive institution for profit* driving the Climate Crisis with anti-science falsehoods and conspiracy theories.
- *Democratic destructive government* driving the Refugee Crisis with xenophobia related conspiracy theories.
- *Totalitarian destructive government* (e.g., Nazi Regime) driving Crimes Against Humanity such as mass killings with rationalizations using falsehoods and conspiracy theories regarding science, race, religion, etc.

The generation of conspiracy theories are exploited to serve as a distraction from *destructive institutions* themselves and their malignant actions and ultimate causes – Legalized Corruption and *destructive institution brainhacking*. In addition and most importantly, a *destructive institution*

maintains political support for itself by using conspiracy theories to maintain the political divide and enemies mindset by stoking mistrust, stoking a Them vs Us fear environment and stoking the vision that the opposition is a core or existential threat – as part of the demoralization process. This sustains a Conspiracy Theory Vicious Cycle where conspiracy theories lay the ground work to spawn more conspiracy theories (see **Figure 1**).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is not an easy task to break a Conspiracy Theory Vicious Cycle. There is significant motivation by malignant actors to generate conspiracy theories driving the political divide further which makes it easier for more conspiracy theories to be formed. The references below can be helpful in mitigating and remediating the damage:
- *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook*
<https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/conspiracy-theory-handbook/>
 - *Our Common Purpose – Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*
<https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report#:~:text=Its%20final%20and%20bipartisan%20report%2C%20Our%20Common%20Purpose%3A,resilient%20democracy%20by%202026%2C%20the%20nation%27s%20250th%20anniversary.>
For the PDF: https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2020-Democratic-Citizenship_Our-Common-Purpose_0.pdf
 - *Securing the United States from Online Disinformation—A Whole-of-Society Approach*
<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/24/securing-united-states-from-online-disinformation-whole-of-society-approach-pub-82549you>

The Conspiracy Theory Handbook is useful on a micro level to help an individual to understand that they are possibly believing in a conspiracy theory (i.e., complex disinformation). *Our Common Purpose – Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* is useful on a macro level in that it has recommendations to reduce the propagation of disinformation in America, e.g., see Strategy 5: Build Civic Information Architecture that Supports Common Purpose. *Securing the United States from Online Disinformation—A Whole-of-Society Approach* focused on dealing with social media platforms.

Appendix A: DESTRUCTIVE INSTITUTIONS BODY OF WORK
BY MICHAEL J. FARGANO

Destructive Institutions Body of Work Library:

https://archive.org/details/@michael_fargano

Destructive Institutions:

*Systems-Based Commonality from Institutional Slavery to Fossil Fuel Institution (Climate Crisis) –
The Understood/Unintended Consequences of the Complex of Amoral Power (Invisible Hand)*

Issue 2 – Working Paper – Request for Comments – 14 April 2020

File Name: Destructive Institutions Framework Issue 2

This paper includes the Destructive Institutions Framework and the first four Applications:
(1) chattel slavery (USA historical focus); (2) climate crisis (USA and worldwide focus); (3) mass
shootings crisis (USA focus); (4) opioid crisis (USA focus with potential for worldwide crisis).

Destructive Institutions Application No. 5:

Worldwide Refugee Crisis Application of the Destructive Institutions Framework

Issue 2 – Working Paper – Request for Comments – 14 April 2020

File Name: Destructive Institutions App5 Refugee Crisis Issue 2

Destructive Institutions Application No. 6:

*USA Federal Government Perverse Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis
Application of the Destructive Institutions Framework*

Issue 2 – Working Paper – Request for Comments – 14 April 2020

File Name: Destructive Institutions App6 USA Fed COVID-19 Resp Issue 2

Destructive Institutions Application No. 7:

USA Perverse Capitalism

Application of the Destructive Institutions Framework

Issue 2 – Working Paper – Request for Comments – 14 April 2020

File Name: Destructive Institutions App7 USA Perverse Capitalism Issue 2

Destructive Institutions Supplement No. 1:

*Crosscheck of the Destructive Institutions Framework
for Conspiratorial Influences*

Issue 2 – Working Paper – Request for Comments – 14 April 2020

File Name: Destructive Institutions Supp1 Crosscheck Issue 2

Appendix B: CALL FOR PAPERS

Mini-Workshop: Destructive Institutions and Anticipatory Knowledge

Part of 11th Annual Unintended Consequences Workshop

10-11 May 2021 – University of Warsaw – Warsaw Poland

Home Page: <http://unintended.uw.edu.pl/>

(Face to Face Workshop Planned – Could be a Virtual Workshop with COVID Travel Restrictions)

*** **CALL FOR PAPERS** ***

- 10 GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF DESTRUCTIVE INSTITUTIONS FOR PURPOSE OF WORKSHOP
CALL FOR PAPERS: A Destructive Institution is a legal institution that uses Corruption (legalized or
illegal) and Brainhacking (cognitive plays like disinformation, propaganda and conspiracy theories) as
a core part of its sustainability and growth strategy and tactics; such that the security of unalienable
Rights such as Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness of people are neglected, degraded or
15 destroyed; where, the institution's core gains including financial gains are correlated with powerful and
large scale destruction* and where there is an out-of-control destruction situation with malfunctioning
or no control limit to the destruction (i.e., no/poor checks) and malfunctioning or no control of the
growth of destruction (i.e., no/poor balance). There are two basic forms of Destructive Institutions:
Destructive Institutions for Profit (e.g., Fossil Fuels Institution driving the Climate Crisis) and
20 Destructive Governments (e.g., Democratic Destructive Governments driving the Refugee Crisis or
Totalitarian States).

For more detail and prior work on Destructive Institution, see the following:

- 25 The video presentation of the Destructive Institutions Body of Work at the 10th Annual
Unintended Consequences Workshop can be found here:
<https://youtu.be/ckoDFpcPsdg>

- 30 The Destructive Institutions Body of Work is posted on the Internet Archive:
https://archive.org/details/@michael_fargano

Primary contact on Destructive Institutions: michael.fargano@gmail.com

35 FOCUS OF MINI-WORKSHOP:

- The focus of the workshop is on predictive analysis regarding future states of Destructive Institutions.
This can be based on existing Destructive Institutions applications analysis (e.g., Climate Crisis,
Refugee Crisis, etc.) that are in the Destructive Institutions Body of Work or new applications analysis
of Destructive Institutions (e.g., Subjugation of Woman, Water Crisis, Rainforest Destruction,
40 Surveillance State, Authoritarian State example, Historical Example that can be use for Future State
predictive analysis, etc.).

Here are examples of questions that could be asked and answered as part of the research and analysis:

* “Destruction” is characterized as irreparable harms or damages, or harms or damages that are very difficult to remediate.

-- What future states are possible *without* a major disruption to Legalized Corruption and Brainhacking?

5

-- What future states are possible *with* a major disruption of Legalized Corruption and Brainhacking?

-- What are the limiting cases of future states under various scenarios?

10

-- How could Regime change impact future states?

-- How could disruptive innovations (e.g., technology) impact future states? How might the Destructive Institution (incumbents) respond to the innovation threats?

15

-- What are extreme scenarios that may be forced with the strain of profit and/or power loss and what are the resulting future states?

CALL FOR PAPERS – *NOT* EXTENSIVELY USING EXISTING DESTRUCTIVE INSTITUTIONS
BODY OF WORK: The existing Destructive Institutions Body of Work need *not* be extensively used as
part of the research and analysis. Papers are welcome in taking the Destructive Institutions concept in
new directions – under the Anticipatory Knowledge framework.

20

CALL FOR PAPERS – EXTENSIVELY USING EXISTING DESTRUCTIVE INSTITUTIONS
BODY OF WORK: The existing Destructive Institutions Body of Work can be extensively used as part
of the research and analysis. The systems-based Destructive Institutions Framework is positioned for
analysis regarding the future states of a Destructive Institution. The Destructive Institutions Framework
can also serve to identify potential emerging Destructive Institutions. This can be accomplished in a
structured way by using the Destructive Institutions Contract to understand the baseline state of a
Destructive Institution and future states based on perturbations to the Destructive Institutions Contract.

25

Conspiracy Theories: Maintaining the Political Divide and Enemies Mindset to Benefit Destructive Institutions

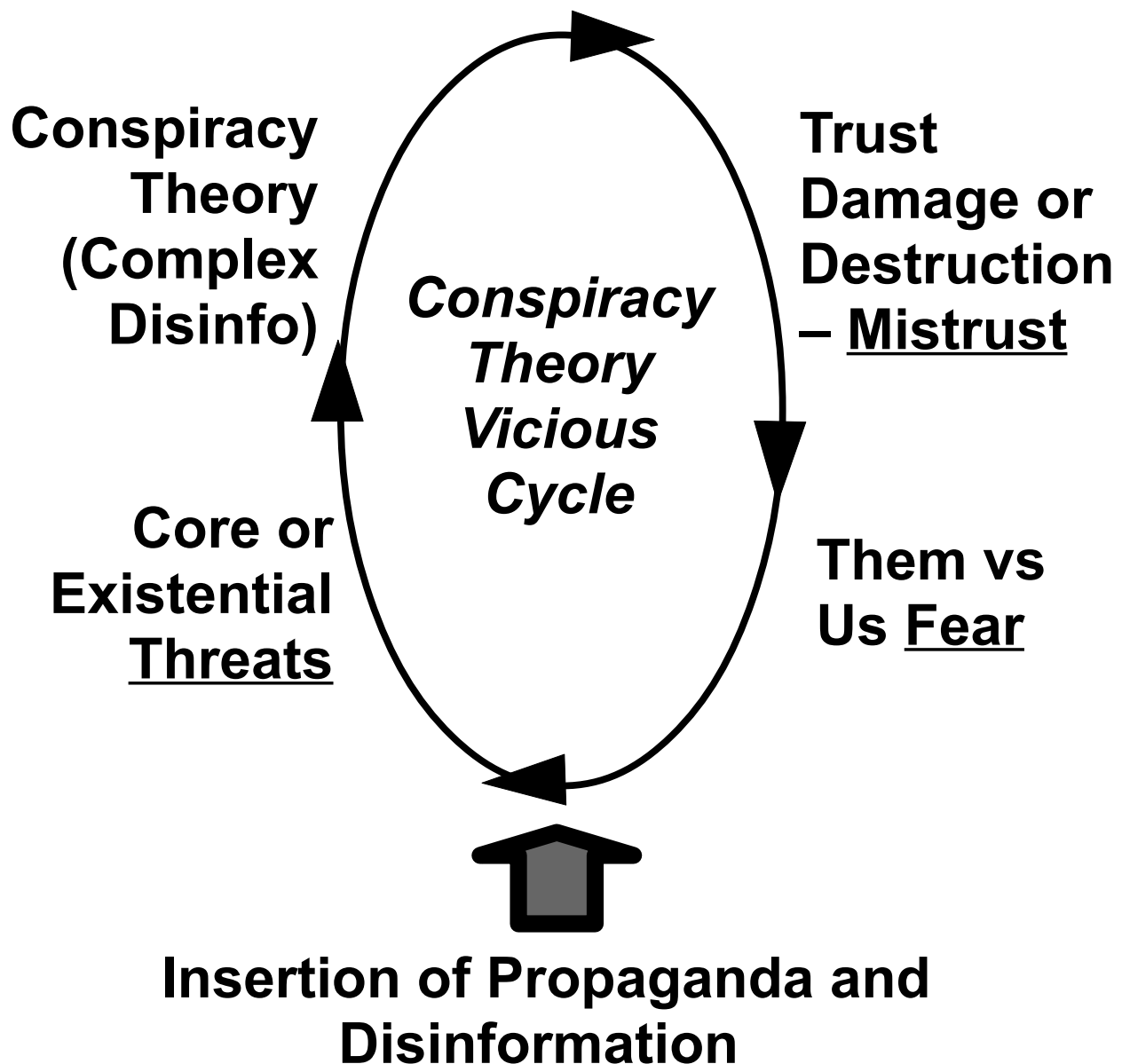


Figure 1: Conspiracy Theory Vicious Cycle